

# Notice of a Leaden Coffin

DISCOVERED AT HEIGHAM.

COMMUNICATED BY

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*Hon. Treasurer and Secretary.*

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A DISCOVERY of considerable Archæological interest was made on the 2nd Dec. 1861, in a chalk-pit, the property of Mr. Bassett, at Stone Hills in the parish of Heigham. The labourers employed in what is locally termed "uncallowing," discovered, about four feet below the surface, a coffin of lead, evidently of great antiquity, which had been enclosed in a wooden one. It was of simple construction, the lower portion being formed of one piece of lead, without solder or fastening; the sides and ends merely turned up, and the top fitted in the same manner. No external ornamentation was visible. Within, the remains of a female skeleton were found. The jawbones were entire, and the teeth well preserved, the shape and enamel of the latter very beautiful. Some pieces of mortar-like cement and the bones of another skeleton were found near.

The dimensions of the coffin were—length, 56 inches; width at the head, 14 inches; at the feet, 13 inches; and the depth, 10 inches.

I am not aware of any similar discovery having been made in Norfolk, nor can I point to any account of an in-

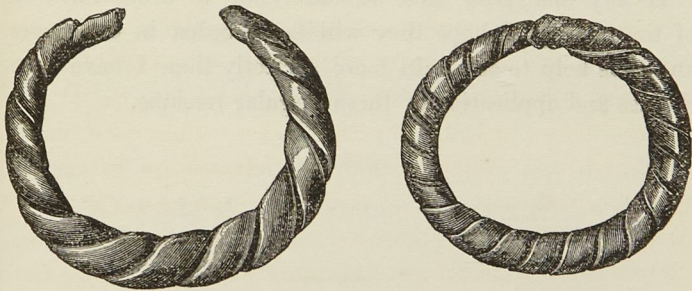
terment exactly resembling it elsewhere ; but my inquiries lead me to suggest a Roman burial.

Mr. Smith, in his *Collectanea Antiqua*, vol. iii., p. 45, in a paper devoted to a description of Roman Sepulchral Remains, enumerates the principal examples known in this country. Several have been discovered at Colchester, one of them containing the skeleton of a female, of which, like the Stone Hills example, the teeth were well preserved. Two of these coffins are engraved ; but, unlike the present one, both the top and sides appear ornamented with scallop-shells and a beaded pattern.

At Southfleet, in 1801, two other leaden coffins were found, the construction of which was precisely similar to that I have described, each being formed of two pieces of lead turned up at the ends and sides. In 1794, a leaden coffin, believed to be Roman, was dug up in Battersea Fields, the skeleton surrounded with lime. In 1811, another was exhumed in the Old Kent Road. In Mansell Street, Whitefriars, and at Stratford-le-Bow, Roman coffins have also been discovered. All these, with the exception of the Southfleet examples, have been more or less ornamented,—not plain, like the one at Heigham.

After this discovery of the coffin, I directed the workmen to make a very careful search for any portions of ornaments, coins, or other relics, that might possibly have escaped their notice. After some trouble they found two bronze torque rings, of which the engravings on p. 215 are the exact size. Both are encrusted with a fine green patina, and are of beautiful workmanship. The extremities are disunited, so that the rings may be termed penannular ; but the ends might have been originally soldered together. Whether they were deposited with the skeleton found in the coffin cannot now be ascertained. I have every reason to believe they were so enclosed, but thrown out by the workmen. The form, pattern, and workmanship, lead to the conclusion

that they are early Saxon ; and this is not improbable, as the Romans and their Saxon successors mingled together, each being influenced by the taste and habits of the other. And this notion is also confirmed by an opinion expressed in a note to me from Mr. Albert Way, to whom I shewed them. He writes that the peculiarity of the specimens under consideration lies chiefly in their being Torc-fashioned in the



construction, and intimates that he does not see why the coffin should not be late Roman and the rings Saxon ; and adds that he does not “remember to have seen amongst the innumerable bronze rings and buckles any specimen actually twisted,” I suppose to give greater strength. The condition of the inner surfaces is also very remarkable : at first sight they look as if they had been hammered to flatten the threads of the twist, but I believe it is the result of long friction, against metal probably. In the larger ring this action is on the side, indicating a very odd adjustment, the strain being as it were oblique.\*

A specimen, very closely resembling these torque rings, was found in the Fairford graves, and described by Mr. Wylie in his publication relative to discoveries at Fairford, pl. ix.

\* Mr. Roach Smith, in a letter, says—“You may rest assured that the coffin is Roman. I have known them *quite* plain, but usually they have a slight pattern—a beaded moulding. The torques are personal ornaments: I had one not unlike them in my London collection, but somewhat larger.”

These remains were found not many yards from the public road, a very usual burial place among the Romans. At Colney, not far from the spot, Roman urns, &c., have been exhumed, but nothing of this character had been previously found at Heigham. The ancient name of the locality was Heigham Heath, and the land is copyhold of the Bishop of Norwich.

If any analagous facts should occur to other members of the Society, I hope they will be recorded in our pages, and thus help to ascertain more perfectly than I have done, the use and application of these singular remains.